

Horses and healing are the magic of Durham's Rivendell Farm

3

By Pamela Morello
Town Times

Sitting high atop a horse named Sierra, nine-year-old Anthony Varrone spots a familiar face outside of the ring and shouts "Hi mom, I love you." With a wave and an 'I love you too' from his mom Cindy, Anthony is back to his lesson, even showing off by sitting backwards on the horse, and leaning back against a pillow.

Anthony, who has autism, was one of the first kids to come to Rivendell Farm in Durham for therapeutic horseback lessons, and in his three years of riding, his mom said he has improved dramatically.

"His self-confidence is amazing," Cindy said. "It has increased his balance and coordination, and his communication skills have improved."

More than that, she said, Anthony, who was petrified of all animals, has bonded with the horses, and no longer minds the two dogs that roam freely across the 10-acre farm. Anthony also disliked people

touching him, but that has improved as well, as therapist Lisa Kelly is able to position him on the horse without a problem.

"The people here are wonderful, from the kids that come to volunteer to both Lisas and Roger in the barn," Cindy said. "Everyone takes ownership over every part of it."

The farm, located at 2 Cherry Lane, is owned by Lisa Harness and her fiancé Roger Passavant. The couple bought the property five years ago and have since made significant additions and improvements including a large barn with 34 stalls, an indoor riding ring and a tack shop.

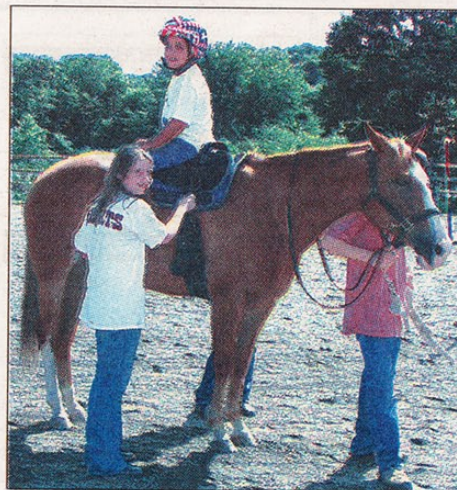
Owning the farm is literally a dream come true for Harness, who has been riding, working and showing horses since she was nine years old. She got free riding lessons in exchange for cleaning out the stalls at a stable near her home. Once she experienced what she called the magic of horses, she decided she wanted all kids to know what that was like.

"I believe that animals have healing power, and I think that horses have an even greater gift," Harness said. "People come to horses already in awe of them. It really does take you to another place."

That belief, and a love of the Lord of the Rings movies, led to the eventual name of the farm. In the movie, Rivendell is the home of the elves, who have healing powers and can talk to animals.

"All our horses are named after characters in the movie," Harness said.

See Rivendell, page 7



Anthony Varrone, 10, of Wolcott, rides Sierra backwards as part of his therapy riding at the farm. Anthony has been riding for three years. He is being helped by Claire Donahue and John Harness.

Photo by Pamela Morello

Rivendell

(Continued from page 3)

The farm is home to a total of 35 horses, eight of which are owned by Harness and Passavant. The rest are boarders.

About 30 people, both kids and adults, come to Rivendell Farm for therapeutic lessons. Their disabilities range from autism to Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, learning disabilities and emotional problems.

The ultimate goal of the farm is to help those with disabilities benefit from the horses' presence and the experience of the instructors, which include Lisa Kelly, Maureen Maher, and Pattie Peoples.

"They come out of their shell and they are excited and enthusiastic," Harness said of the therapeutic riders. "They feel some freedom, and they fall in love with the horses

they ride."

But Harness believes their work is helping everyone in the process, including parents and the teenage volunteers who serve as horse walkers alongside the instructors during therapy sessions.

"The parents of the kids feel good because their child is so happy when they're here," Harness said. "And the volunteer teens are helping these kids to smile."

It is those smiles, and the laughter and giggle of the kids, that make it all worthwhile.

"We work 12 to 16 hour days all week to get to Saturday to see the kids and how much they enjoy being on those horses," Passavant said.

Therapeutic lessons are on Saturday mornings from 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Some sessions

may be scheduled during the week.

Passavant lives on the farm and his work begins at 5 a.m. with the horses' first feeding, until about 9 p.m. when he tops off their water for the night. He gets help from barn manager Brenda Shapiro.

Harness lives in New

Canaan and works in Westport as a real estate manager. She spends the weekends at Rivendell Farm.

The couple will marry in September on the farm, and Harness will ride her horse Alegria to the ceremony.

For more information visit www.rivendellfarm.net.